

# Egypt's Cauldron of Revolt

It was striking workers that first inspired the Egyptian uprising. And they're still at it.

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CAIRO — In the sprawling factories of El-Mahalla el-Kubra, a gritty, industrial town a few hours' drive north of Cairo, lies what many say is the heart of the Egyptian revolution. "This is our Sidi Bouzid," says Muhammad Marai, a labor activist, referring to the town in Tunisia where a frustrated street vendor set himself on fire, sparking the revolution there.

Indeed, the roots of the mass uprising that swept dictator Hosni Mubarak from power lie in the central role this dust-swept company town played years ago in sparking workers' strikes and grassroots movements countrywide. And it is the symbolic core of the latest shift in the revolution: a wave of strikes meant to tackle social and economic inequities, which has brought parts of Egypt to a standstill.

Here in Mahalla's smog-beaten, faded yellow factories and textile mills, a series of workers' strikes demanding better pay and benefits erupted in 2006. The actions, in a country where large demonstrations were rare and independent labor organizing remains illegal, galvanized a youth movement that played a key role in eventually toppling Mubarak.

More than 24,000 workers at dozens of state-owned and private textile mills, in particular the mammoth Egypt Spinning and Weaving plant, went on strike and occupied factories for six days in 2006, winning a pay raise and some health benefits. Similar actions took place in 2007.

Then, on April 6, 2008, thousands joined protesting workers in one of the town's central squares, a frenetic array of vegetable stalls and shouting street vendors. "At first, there were only a few of us," said Marai. "We chanted 'Down, down with Hosni Mubarak!' and people started joining us."

Within hours, the protest had grown to thousands and riveted the country. Incredibly, demonstrators pulled down a poster of Mubarak and stomped on it; some clashed with the police and torched vehicles. Such images had not been seen in Egypt for almost 30 years and shook the government to its core, according to former officials.

The workers immediately won concessions — as they had in the strikes of 2006 and 2007 — including bonuses and pay hikes. The success spawned a Facebook group, the April 6 Youth Movement, which has played a prominent part in the current uprising, and inspired a strike wave over the next two years.

"After Mahalla in 2008, the first weaknesses in the regime appeared," says Gamal Eid of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information. "Nothing was the same in Egypt after that."

Perhaps most importantly, the Mahalla strikes birthed a new opposition movement as socialists, left-wing lawyers, and Internet activists forged lasting links with labor leaders and facilitated connections between factories. The U.S. Embassy observed at the time that "in Mahalla, a new organic opposition force bubbled to the surface, defying current political labels, and apparently not affiliated with the [Muslim Brotherhood]. This may require the government to change its script," according to a classified document released by WikiLeaks.

In recent weeks, Mahalla workers joined a nationwide general strike that started on Feb. 9 and likely tilted momentum in favor of the Tahrir Square protesters and hastened Mubarak's fall two days later. "The workers have tremendous power to change society," says Kamal al-Fayumi, a labor leader who works at a power station and has been imprisoned a number of times for his activities. "When we entered the picture, it signaled the end for Mubarak."

Once a symbol of the grandeur and vision of the country's economic nationalism, Mahalla was home to the first fully Egyptian-owned enterprise, the Egypt Spinning and Weaving plant, established in the 1930s. By the 1960s, the plant was the largest factory in the Middle East, employing tens of thousands.

But under Mubarak, a large number of state firms were privatized, including some in Mahalla, pushing thousands into relative job insecurity. And many state subsidies were slashed — food subsidies alone dropped by more than half during his rule.

After 2004, these changes accelerated with the appointment of a "reform cabinet" of business tycoons who pushed further liberalization of the economy along IMF-suggested lines. On the one hand, this produced robust growth rates and attracted investment; on the other it fostered official corruption and exacerbated woes for the poor, who faced soaring inflation and food prices.

By 2008, the U.S. Embassy was noting that the "fundamental unspoken Egyptians [sic] social pact — the peoples' obeisance in exchange for a modest but government-guaranteed standard of living — is under stress," according to the document leaked by WikiLeaks.

Many in Mahalla say the reforms have put tremendous pressure on them. "I have five children and I can barely survive," says Khala Muhammad, a striking worker. "I can't afford even basic things."

Fayumi, who works at the power station, says he and his colleagues work double shifts or two jobs to make ends meet. He works from 7 a.m. to 12 a.m. every day and still finds it difficult to pay the rent.

Wages have not kept pace with rising staple prices. According to official statistics, the average base salary for employees in Mahalla is about \$100 a month, a derisory sum that is nonetheless more than in many other towns, thanks to the previous strikes. Elsewhere, this could be as low as \$50 a month.

Such pressures have fueled widespread labor actions across the country, buoyed by the anti-Mubarak protests and growing since his departure. There have been work stoppages and protests in government banks, the oil and gas ministry, the transportation sector, the telecommunications ministry, the health ministry and more, in dozens of cities across the country.

Many of the strikers are state employees or workers in public-sector factories who are concerned about privatization. "Privatization would make us like temporary workers who can be fired on whim," says Yasser Ishaq Ahmed, who is on strike from Elegikt, a state-owned electricity company.

Most are also demanding raising (and enforcing) the minimum wage. "How can I support my children? I make 400 pounds a month," about \$65, he says. "All of the workers in the company make 135,000 pounds per month combined, but the CEO alone makes 180,000."

A number of strikes have already won some or all of their demands, most notably at the Tawfiq al-Nour department store chain, when 5,000 employees from around the country descended on Cairo to demand shorter working hours and benefits. Strikers won a 12-hour day (down from 16) and a sizable pay raise.

The spread of strikes in the wake of Mubarak's resignation has alarmed Egyptian officials. On Feb.

14, citing economic instability, the Army urged strikers to “go back to work,” in what many took to be a thinly veiled threat. On state TV and radio the striking workers have been repeatedly denounced as selfish and upsetting the economy, even while the protesters who were in Tahrir are now praised.

But the two groups are not so easily separated — thousands of workers joined the demonstrations in Tahrir, and many say the political space provided by Mubarak’s fall has emboldened them to strike. “This is the time to act. We want an overthrow of this whole system, not just the removal of one person,” says a labor leader from Mahalla, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Still, labor organizers say they take the Army’s threats seriously — the memory of a pair of striking workers hanged by the new government following the 1952 revolution, which brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power, has not faded. And as economic instability continues, they risk losing the urban middle-class allies that helped make the revolution possible. “Dear Egyptians, go back to your work on Sunday,” tweeted Wael Ghonim, a Google marketing executive whose account of his detention by Egyptian security services galvanized protesters. “Work like never before and help Egypt become a developed country.”

In Mahalla’s crowded coffee shops, where the air is thick with shisha smoke and the tea served in dirty glasses, labor activists are debating and planning their next move. Ironically, while the rest of the country is engulfed in labor unrest, there have been no strikes in Mahalla this week.

Instead, workers here are planning the launch of an independent labor union, a rarity in a country where most unions are tied to the state. Some see this as a move with clear political implications. “When you are fighting a state-controlled union, that is inherently a political demand, not just an economic one,” says Marai, the Mahalla labor activist.

In fact, many of the strikes assert political and economic demands simultaneously, in part because the CEOs of many firms are tied to the Mubarak regime. And with a few exceptions, such as steel magnate and National Democratic Party kingpin Ahmed Ezz, those CEOs are still in positions of power.<sup>a</sup>

“A lot of us here in Mahalla are talking about democracy and political freedom alongside better wages and living conditions,” says Marai. “Some people felt that our mission was accomplished after Mubarak fell, but I think our revolution is just beginning.”

**BY ANAND GOPAL**

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